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SUBJECT: CAMEROON HOSTAGES: MFA PROVIDES BACKGROUND

REF: YAOUNDE 1071

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young, 1.4 (b/d).

1. (C/NF) SUMMARY: MFA Cameroon desk officer Daniel Westerink (PROTECT THROUGHOUT) on November 12 briefed on the Cameroon hostage incident that ended with the release of the hostages on November 11. While affirming that the GOF did not pay a ransom, Westerink strongly implied that the company employing the hostages (the Bourbon Group) and/or oil company TOTAL did pay for their release. Westerink said that Cameroon and Nigeria cooperated well in the effort to secure release of the hostages. He did not know the fate of the kidnappers, whom he described as criminals and not members of a political group interested in the Bakassi region of Cameroon. END SUMMARY.

2. (C/NF) We discussed the Cameroon hostage case (reftel) with MFA desk officer Daniel Westerink (PROTECT THROUGHOUT) on November 12, following the November 11 release of the seven French, two Cameroonian, and one Tunisian who were seized on October 30-31 by a group purporting to represent the Bakassi Freedom Fighters. The 10 hostages worked for the Bourbon Group, a French company providing support services to oil company TOTAL's oil platforms off the coast of Nigeria and Cameroon. When seized, the hostages were servicing a platform in Cameroonian territory near the Bakassi peninsula, which had recently been awarded to Cameroon after protracted litigation with Nigeria.

3. (C/NF) Westerink said that the kidnappers were a criminal group and that their claim of being part of the Bakassi Freedom Fighters was a smokescreen to provide cover and a form of legitimacy. On whether a ransom was paid, Westerink, who did not feel at liberty to provide details, affirmed that the French government did not pay a ransom but clearly suggested that one or both of the private companies had paid for the hostages' release.

4. (C/NF) Westerink said that he did not know what happened to the kidnappers after they released the hostages and after "the other arrangements were taken care of." He described the kidnapping as being well organized and noted that the kidnappers and other members of the plot were in more than one location. Specifically, the kidnapper's spokesman, "Commander" Ebi Dari, was not with the kidnappers and was issuing statements from another location. Westerink said that Dari's location elsewhere may have been responsible for the confusing statements the kidnappers were making, with claims of having killed or wounding hostages contradicted by later statements. None of the claims about harming hostages turned out to be true and were attempts to intimidate the governments and companies involved.

5. (C/NF) Coordination among the GOF, Cameroon, Nigeria,

the private companies, and the hostages' families went well, under the supervision of the MFA's crisis cell, Westerink said. Early on, all parties agreed that there should be one and only one negotiator to communicate with the kidnappers. This role was performed by a Cameroonian official. The various agencies of the GOF worked closely with Cameroonian counterparts. Nigeria offered good cooperation, but its role was different -- "We mainly kept the Nigerians informed of what we and the Cameroonians were doing, and asked them to avoid taking any action without telling us. We needed to keep them informed in case their military or police stumbled upon the kidnappers, who were operating right on the border in Bakassi, and going back and forth between the Nigerian and Cameroonian sides. We also informed them that Cameroonian security forces might cross into Nigerian territory if a rescue operation were mounted, but thankfully, it never came to that."

16. (C/NF) Although relieved that the crisis was over, Westerink expressed some concern that this incident could lead to other kidnappings, especially if it were learned that "someone paid for the release of the hostages." He noted that kidnappings of this sort were common in Nigeria but were rarer in Cameroon, and he hoped that this case did not indicate that Cameroon would soon be the locus of hostage-takings for ransom. Westerink said that private companies operating in both Nigeria and Cameroon often had more relaxed security guidelines for their workers in Cameroon, and he thought that some companies, in the wake of this incident, would implement tighter security practices in Cameroon.

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17. (C/NF) In closing, Westerink said that the kidnapping incident had the salutary effect of causing President Biya to return to Cameroon sooner than he wanted. Biya had been flitting about New York, Paris, and Switzerland since the UNGA in New York in September. He returned to Cameroon a couple of days after the hostages were taken "because he didn't want to give the impression he was hurrying home to help rescue mostly foreigners, although the incident was clearly the reason he went home when he did," Westerink observed.

STAPLETON